

Reviving Middle East Peace Process

The UN Security Council has condemned Hebron Massacre but not censored Israel for it. The latter would have been in the fitness of things because Tel Aviv could not be fully absolved of the responsibility for what had happened on the West Bank. The US-born settler of a murderer had sneaked through Israeli defenses around the mosque and killed those 50 Palestinian civilians besides injuring a few hundred of them in a most dastardly fit of gunmanship imaginable. The killer's death, destined as it was, could have meant either of the two things: one, as a zealot he might have acted on his own, with perhaps a dose of incitement from an extremist group or that he was assigned for the job from behind the screen. Anyway, his suicidal death has sealed off any possibility of knowing the truth easily.

But even this hate-crime-not-the-criminal depreciation of the security council has come about full three weeks after the massacre had taken place. The explanation being offered for the belated condemnation is that the United States had waited for a PLO commitment to return to the negotiating table to be in hand before the security council met. The PLO on the other hand reacted to this US insistence by repeating the urgency of implementing measures to ensure security of the Palestinians in the occupied areas. For all practical purposes, therefore, the deprecatory part of the security council resolution, coming that late as it did, sounds even more academic and ritualistic than the usual condemnatory statements from that UN organ. We discover a saving grace though in the fact that Israel has been called upon to prevent illegal acts of violence by the Jewish settlers, if necessary by confiscation of their weapons.

A remotely substantive part of the security council resolution consists in calling for a temporary international or foreign presence as envisaged in the declaration of principles contained in the PLO-Israel accord of last September. The UN and the European union having offered to send observers and not armed troops, it is predictable as to what form the international presence, if and when it materialises, will take. The PLO wants the UN force to be armed to ensure protection of the Palestinians. One wonders why during all these months after last September it has not been possible to secure a UN presence in the disputed territories. Had it been a reality by now, even in the form of an observers' group, there might not have been the Hebron massacre and thus no need for the PLO's stress on an armed international presence.

The US envoy at the UN announced after the adoption of the security council resolution that senior Israeli and Palestinian officials would soon meet. Syria, Jordan and Lebanon are stated to have agreed to re-start bilateral negotiations with Israel in April. All these somewhat feebly indicate that the atmospheres are coming back to normal for the Middle East peace process to resume. It is also a bit hope-giving that the US does not regard the status of Jerusalem as a closed matter. On the other hand, the US has rigidity on the question of Palestinian sovereignty over territories under Israeli occupation. To our understanding, the only way to a meaningful revival of the Middle East peace process lies in a supervised interim administration over the Israeli-occupied territories. Unless a neutral body takes charge, terrorism will continue to breed terrorism.

Masterda Centenary

The centenary celebrations of Masterda Surya Sen commence in Chittagong today. Many other cities and towns would be joining in the extraordinary celebrations but the pride of place has justly been taken by Chittagong. For the nation would today not only remember in gratitude that charismatic revolutionary and his sacrifices but also, if not more, the raid of the Chittagong Armoury and the Jalalabad Hill Battle which that proud son of Chittagong led from the beginning to the end.

We call the celebrations extraordinary for through these we are for the first time, formally and collectively, going to exult in our glorious legacy of the anti-colonial struggle against the British — something we had not done in our days of Pakistan delusion. From an eerie and unreal existence of a nation without a past — or worse, one rejecting its past — we enter into the continuity of history and thereby sanity and possibilities of growing into the future.

The celebrations of a hundred years of the birth of Masterda — the loving epithet denoting the fact of his being a teacher, and what a teacher he was of young revolutionaries walking with heavenly composure the planks to the gallows — do have another significance that stands out. We are celebrating a revolutionary and not one from a gallery of big vaunted names who lived and prospered in a fashion so unlike Masterda.

The awareness of the importance of Masterda's revolutionary sacrifice was always there in the heart of the partisans of our long democratic struggle during the Pakistan days. Perhaps as a recognition of that, and also as his personal appreciation of and devotion to the anti-colonial hero, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Rahman named a residential hall of the Dhaka University after Surya Sen soon after liberation.

Chittagong has on many occasions given us a lead in many matters. We are grateful to that great city for leading us in the matter of Masterda centenary celebrations. Let the supreme hero's example inspire us to new horizons of patriotism and sacrifice.

Growing Economic Regionalism and SAFTA's Pace

UST on to its third month, the year 1994 has already witnessed major advances in consolidation of economic regionalism worldwide. The North American Free Agreement came into force on January 1. Better known as NAFTA, the agreement creates a single market of some 367 million people in Canada, the United States and Mexico. The European Economic Area (EEA) consisting of 17 countries of West Europe, including the 12-nation European Union (EU), also came into being. The EEA links some 372 million people of its member countries, making it the world's single largest economic bloc. And now, the EU, formerly called the European Community (EC), itself has moved ahead to expand the Union's membership. With the inclusion of Sweden, Finland and then Austria, Norway, the EU would be enlarged into a Union of 16 states by January 1, 1995.

In West Asia, the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took certain major steps toward creating momentum for deeper regional economic integration. The GCC states — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the UAE — aim to create a common Gulf market and, as a component of their action plan, have asked for steps to be taken for linking their stock exchanges. Other items on the agenda include unification of customs tariffs, freeing movement of goods and currency alignment.

In Asia Pacific, economic regionalism shows signs of getting more active and may be, a bit contentious too. The 17-member Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum appears to be moving ahead with the programme announced last year for attaining closer ties

among its constituents, namely — Australia, Brunei, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States. The first-ever meeting of the APEC Finance Ministers of March 18-19, marks a new programme for promoting closer integration of the region's capital and financial markets.

EAEC

APEC's plans to grow into a structured economic bloc is also causing misgivings in some of the countries in East Asia. They are afraid of domination of the forum by its more powerful members. These countries are spearheading a move to activate the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) as an exclusively regional forum. The EAEC now takes the characteristics of a sub-group within APEC. To retain an exclusively East Asian regional colour, EAEC specifically excludes the non-Asian members of the APEC from its folds. As a regional consultative body for East Asia, the EAEC perhaps has first to define its own agenda of work. It's quite conceivable that the EAEC could have views of its own which may not necessarily conform to the perspectives of the dominant members of the APEC, leading to discord within the larger forum.

The year 1994 also started off with the formal launching of a tariff-cutting programme from January 1 by the ASEAN countries — Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand — in a bid to create an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) within the next 15 years. The AFTA programme envisages bringing tariffs on most manufactured

goods, made and traded within ASEAN, down to a range of zero to five per cent by the end of the 15-year period. However, a meeting of the ASEAN Economic Ministers, scheduled for April, is likely to consider the possibilities for accelerating the AFTA programme. Originally announced in January 1992, AFTA had planned to cut tariffs on intra-ASEAN trade in manufactured and processed agricultural goods to a maximum of five per cent by the year 2008. The plans had to be revised last year as some of the member countries could not start trimming tariffs. So, January 1

spoke of the enlargement of the European Union to a 16-nation world's largest trade bloc. The process had been fraught with all sorts of pitfalls. Among the aspirants to the EU membership, Austria, for instance, insisted on maintaining strict limits on truck traffic across its territories to contain pollution. The question of retention of agricultural subsidies proved another thorny issue. Norway, on the other hand, was stoutly refusing to open up its fishing grounds to all the EU member-countries. And, the issue of power-sharing in the enlarged Union created yet another tangle.

As mentioned earlier, although strong in terms of the number of inhabitants, the SAARC region is weak in economic prowess. Exports from the region account for less than one per cent of global trade. Intra-regional transactions cover hardly three per cent of the SAARC member-nations' global trade. To start with, SAFTA thus does not have much to build on. Given the undercurrent of political distrust and competing interests of the industries in the region, it would perhaps be too long to expect SAFTA to roar ahead from the word go. Besides, in exchanging trade concessions, the negotiators will haggle till the very last during the bargaining sessions. It is all in the game — to wring as much concession as possible at the negotiating table.

Provisions for Special Treatment

SAARC — South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation — does not have the characteristics of a trade bloc, at least not yet. If and when it turns out to be one, it would be the largest trade bloc yet, linking more than a billion people. Alas, with per capita income ranging from \$180 to \$550, they would mostly be consumers with not much of a purchasing power. SAARC turned its focus specifically on trade only in 1993, the eighth year of its existence. It was at the SAARC summit in April, 1993 that the framework agreement on SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAFTA) was signed, envisioning trimming

ALONG MY WAY

SB Chaudhuri

saw rather a quiet relaunch of AFTA. Nonetheless, it did start the process of creation of a trade bloc of more than 330 million consumers.

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latest news suggest that the IGG would meet around the middle of this year to negotiate exchange of trade concessions. The SAFTA, it is being forecast, would become operational by December, 1995.

Where the negotiating parties insist on strict reciprocity, the process of exchange of tariff concessions can be quite long and arduous — turning even acrimonious at times. Other issues such as environmental concerns, sub-regional considerations, may impinge on the agenda. The hassle over the NAFTA side-agreements is too recent to be forgotten so soon. One of the main reasons why AFTA is taking rather faltering steps, is the continued lobbying by ASEAN industries with their respective governments, to go slow on tariff reductions so that the existing levels of protection to the domestic manufacturers may be prolonged. A while ago, I

the special needs of the least developed member states and asks for concrete preferential measures to be extended to them. In fact, the regional trade imbalances cannot possibly be sorted out unless special concessions, based on the principle of non-reciprocity, are extended to the least developed SAARC member countries.

The formation of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) last month also could advance the cause of SAFTA. If the leaders of trade and industry in the region can sort out the conflicting interests of their constituents, it would be easier for the governments to come up with agreed lists of trade and tariff concessions to be exchanged. In fact, the newly formed SCCI could very well act as the catalyst to bring SAFTA home quicker.

Lack of complementarities in trade in the SAARC region is very much in evidence. It is well known that after the partition of the subcontinent, the governments of the newly established countries had fostered a policy of competitiveness to replace existing complementarities. For SAFTA to take off and grow, complementarities in regional trade need to be located afresh. New forms of complementarity may have to be established. It is encouraging to find that the SCCI has already decided to set up 'product councils' for major items of mutual interest to the member countries. These councils, it is said, would explore prospects of joint ventures, technology transfer and promote marketing facilities among the member countries. Such a programme could indeed foster complementarity in trade in the region.

the US-sponsored notion that free markets alone can power economic development in the world's poor countries. As ex-Malaysian finance minister Tun Daim Zainuddin puts it, the state must engage in "suitable interventions" to make the market economy work.

Western economists tend to downplay the global relevance of East Asia's economic success. Seikei University professor Ryoichi Hirota points out that while the 1993 World Bank study entitled 'The East Asian Miracle' praised the accomplishments of the region's economic tigers, it went on to say their experience could not be applied to other developing countries, he points out.

The Japanese flatly disagree with the idea that the East Asian formula is inapplicable outside the region. Tokyo has been generously funding conferences in which Asian officials to exchange views and experience with their counterparts from other parts of the world, recently sponsoring one such meeting in Jakarta for African officials to have discussions with experts from the world's most economically dynamic region.

Geopolitics: Asia's Ascent to Power

percent while the rest of the world economy will stay sluggish.

Some Asian countries — such as China and Japan — appear to be on the threshold of translating economic strength into political influence.

Between these two, China seems to excite greater strategic concerns. The worries are partly fuelled by the uncertainties of Chinese politics in a post-Deng Xiaoping era.

"Asia can present itself as an alternative to the West," said Chaiwat Satha-Anand, a political science professor of Thailand's Thammasat University, during one such conference in January.

Indeed, the Commission for a New Asia, a 17-member group of Asian intellectuals of various political persuasions, released a report urging an 'Asian renaissance,' recalling the long period before the West began its climb to world dominance in the 1500s when Asia was a centre of world power and civilisation.

Still, there is no shortage of analysts sceptical of the idea that Asia's economic clout will turn the region into the sort of catalytic political power Europe and the United States have been.

Ex-US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, in a talk he gave in Manila recently, argued that the more likely scenario is Asia may be best by power politics.

The region is susceptible to the emergence of a number of independent power centres, which if they collaborate could give this region cumulatively enormous political power," he said. "But if they compete, this will inject into the region power politics without making

strength. Japan is unable to project its military power without running into great resistance at home and overseas.

Part of Japan's predicament is the fact that economic power has changed vastly in the enormously more interdependent world that has merged in the post-Cold War era.

Even economic superpowers these days find that their clout is limited by countervailing forces operating in the global economy. Japan's mightiest industries, like steel, shipbuilding and computers, are being beaten at their own game by competitors in former colonies like South Korea and Taiwan.

Whatever increased political influence Asia may acquire in the future may come more from the power of its economic example rather than from gunboats and warplanes, say some analysts.

Though they have embraced market economics tighter than many other developing regions, most Asians do not buy

(Asia) a determining region of global political power."

Brzezinski added that much depends on the "decisive interplay between China and Japan, how these two countries relate to the United States and to the degree the United States stays engaged in this region."

Non-believers in Asia's prospects as a global political power point to Japan, which has remained impotent in world politics despite being a global economic superpower. Tokyo itself was greatly embarrassed by its inability to assume a leadership role in such global crisis situations as the

gulf war. Though its armed forces are equipped with the world's best weapons and backed by the country's awesome industrial

OPINION

Primary Education: Role of Mosques

Education, an elusive dream of our nation, has always been talked about by the high-ups in administration and political fields. But our backbone i.e. education, so rightly it is compared to, has yet to get its resilience and firmness to erect our heads high in this global village — resulting in limping in every step of our national life. We have already had a declaration making primary education compulsory from January 1992. Has any body heard about the massive plan that it naturally requires and the steps to implement this plan? How can the government make it compulsory without making available all facilities required? We don't have adequate schools and funds and, above all political and religious will and commitment to make it a success. I specially want to point at political and religious commitments. Because these are very much intermingled in our society.

Before taking the step, the matter may be discussed in the Parliament to justify the real need of the programme.

Motius Samad Chowdhury Phultola Tea Estate, Sylhet

Savings and Encouragement

Sir, 'Savings' appears to be a forgotten issue altogether. It doesn't even figure in the current reforms programme. Isn't this a great pity where even a few months back the ads on BTV were on a very high frequency? Then a suddenly surfaced 'economist' Professor started shouting hoarse that the Govt. was giving too much on Savings Certificates, too much on term deposits and too much on everything. Thus, the Govt. decided to hit hard at small savers by withdrawing and drastically reducing rates of interest and in the process stifling the disposal income of

people. The religious leaders are also seen very much eager to advise people about matters other than education. Perhaps none has ever found them advising people

I think by this way we can really make a great leap forward towards attaining the goal "Education for all". We should also take into account the factors involved in this network and outcome from it. These are

1) The whole community will be locked in this system with the understanding that our religion, Islam, also gives utmost emphasis on education and it is our sacred duty to acquire knowledge. So using mosques for education can not have a bar from the religious point of view.

2) As the mosque will be used for this great task, local people will also come forward to extend their helping hands as they always do, if approached, for mosques.

3) The imams will also have some extra income and have opportunity to teach the children about morality, duties to family, society and country.

4) Local higher-class-students who pass off their time idle will also have something to act upon, profitably. They will certainly grow up responsible towards society, and have a respected place before the local children. This whole phenomenon will lead to have a sense of being worthy citizens.

I don't know how our policy makers will take these suggestions. Will they just shrug it off? But I fervently request the media to focus seriously on this concept of using the mosques and other places of worship for schooling. I am sure, by exchanging views with clerics, scholars and publishing articles, arranging debates on this topic, we can develop a suitable system of using our available resources and facilities to bring our children out to light from the darkness of illiteracy.

Dr Mortayez Amin Ope DMCH.

Arms recovery drive

Sir, We like to draw the attention of the Government to an idea of deploying a group of our well trained army personnel with the law enforcing authority to recover arms from the capital city's all probable places, and also to find from where these are being supplied. Army intelli-

gence can take up a ground-work study programme first, and thereafter can fix up a time for arms recovery drive. The recent gunbattle (5/3/94) at Jagannath University College appeals to all that something drastic has to be done to stop the on-going mindlessness.

We do remember how effectively our armed forces rendered their service during floods and natural calamities. Before taking the step, the matter may be discussed in the Parliament to justify the real need of the programme.

M. Ahmad Uttara, Dhaka